Scorched Canyon - Level Design — Documentation

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Design Test

- Objective to eliminate or rescue one or more NPCs (Rescuing Alyx - keep it simple, but interesting)
- 4. Showing that I understand the Arkane style of level design

(Figure 1 - Design Test)

This is a design test that Arkane used to use, Steve Lee shared this on his YouTube channel which I would highly recommend checking out. Its a really useful resource for level designers.

The main elements of the design test are:

- Objective to eliminate or rescue one or more NPCs
- Showing an understanding of the Arkane style of level design

I used an unreal engine to create this level. I have a level design creation kit which allows me to use some basic AI, weapons, and a climbing system etc. To clarify I did not create this tool kit.

Akrane Research

Before starting this project, I did research into Arkane studios and their approach to level design. I watched this fantastic documentary by Noclip on Arkane Studios, one of the key things I found with their design philosophy was always having multiple ways of doing things which obviously fits with the immersive sim genre. Here are some of the points that stuck out to me.

- Players have multiple options in exploration and combat so they can choose, they should feel like they are the author of their own story.
- Don't want players always using the same tools, frequently change the environment to shack up the players gameplay patterns.

Mechanics

I used a level design kit to create this project. Here are a list of mechanics that were at my disposal when designing. I have highlighted the mechanics that I used designed to be used in this level.

- WASD movement
- Space bar on object to climb on them
- Crouch press left "Ctrl"
- Select different weapons by pressing "1" "2"
- Hold "right click" to aim weapon and "left click" to shoot
- Press "r" to reload
- Press "e" when behind an enemy to stun them
- If you die press "f" to respawn at your las checkpoint

Inspiration

My initial inspiration for the level was based on some of the early SAS missions in the desert. Though as I developed the level I drifted further away from what happened in history and went more with a generic desert theme. This is because I wanted more creative freedom. I found the video below really informative by a YouTube channel called Mark Felton Productions.

Link: SAS Airfield Raid 1942

Flow Chart

I chose to design the opening level as it would allow me to establish some basic tutorial elements. The hope was that this would save me time when it came to the playtests. I am a follower of Richard Carrillo (Twitter) and his book "The Role of a Great Game Designer". The book mostly focuses on Game Design but one of the lessons I learned was about creating design goals. So, I figured this would also be useful to do in level design.

Level Design Goals

- Allow the player to approach scenarios in different ways.
 - This will change according to the players own morals, so therefore there should be non-lethal options for all confrontations.
- Ensure the player is aware that there are different ways to approach scenarios.
 - Make it clear for new players to understand that this is not designed to be a 100% linear experience because the players choices change the outcome.

These goals are based on the Arkane design philosophy. Having them in place should help me to achieve a similar gameplay experience as an Arkane game and therefore accomplishing this element of the design test.

Version 1

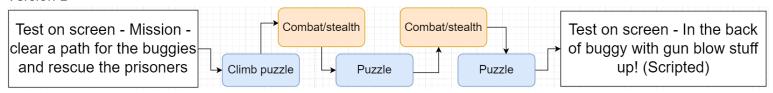


Figure 2 (Flow Chart Version 1)

The aim is to achieve a play testable project as soon as possible so therefore the initial cutscene that would go before the level will just be text on the screen. Along with the final scripted element of the level where you ride in the back of a truck shooting aircraft. Both these elements of the project can be added in at a later stage.

Here I am focusing on the main core of the level. With this first version of the flow chart, I'm laying out the flow and pacing of the level in its simplest form. As you can see above, I plan to have two combat/stealth Sections and three puzzles. Keeping with the Arkcane design philosophy all combat sections will have ways of getting through that are non-lethal. Keeping in line with my design goals, I will try to ensure that each one of these sections of the level can be completed in different ways and ensure the player knows this.

Version 2

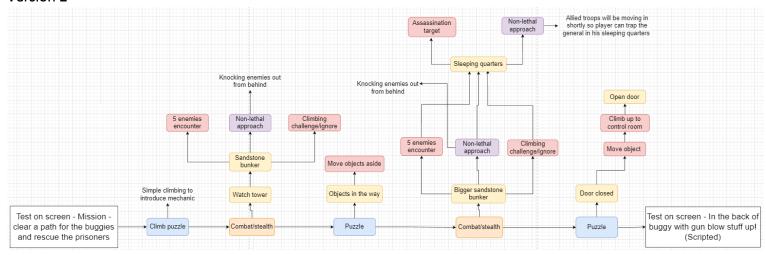


Figure 3 (Flow Chart Version 2)

With version two of my flow chart, I have further developed each one of the course sections of the level.

Version 2 Enlarged

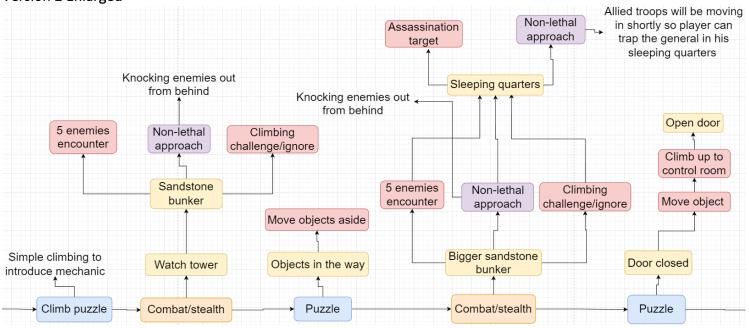


Figure 4 (Flow Chart Version 2 Enlarged)

This is an enlarged Image of my flow chart so you can more easily see it. one of the key things I've tried to do in this level is introduce gameplay mechanics using a pattern that I saw talked about in the level design lobby podcast (Podcast) run by a senior level designer named Max Peers.

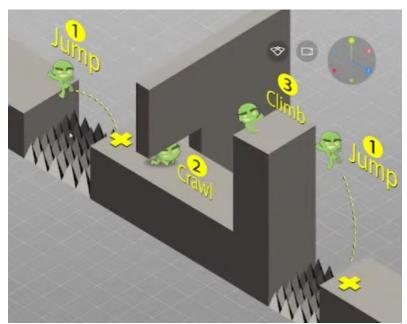


Figure 5 (gameplay mechanic pattern)

The image above is an example of this gameplay mechanic pattern. You can introduce a mechanic like jumping but before you get the player to jump again you get them to do another two mechanics like crawling or climbing and then give them that jumping requirement again but this time you've changed it around. As seen in the image above, the second time the player jumps it's from a higher height.

I have attempted to integrate this into my level with a few different mechanics. For example, in the first puzzle the player will need to move crates to clear a path. This first puzzle introduces the mechanic of the movable crate. The second puzzle requires the player to move a crate and then climb on top of it. Climbing has also been introduced earlier on in the level so in this second puzzle I am reusing the crate moving mechanic and the climbing mechanic but this time combining them. This enables me to add new and interesting gameplay to my level without adding any new mechanics. Just combining and reusing the mechanics that have already been established.

Theme

For the theme I already know I'm basing this on a real-life mission that was done by the SAS so I will go to history and the environment that mission took place in for my theme and visual references. The Raid on Sidi Haneish Airfield took place in the desert. So, I will be looking for references from the desert, but I'll also be digging a bit deeper looking at mountains, bunkers and trenches.

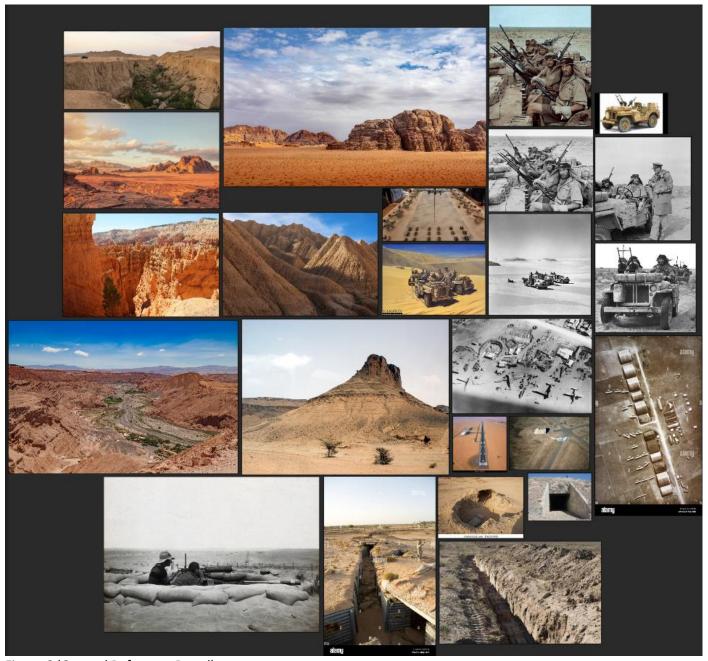


Figure 6 (General Reference Borad)

As you can see above this is my general reference board. This is a collection of image references for the whole project. A lot of the images are in groups so the images next to each other relate to each other.

2D Map Designs

For this stage of the process, I will create top-down maps outlining the basic environment of each area of the level. I do top-down maps because it allows me to plan the environment before I'm in the engine. I usually find the more planning I do before I go into the white boxing stage the higher quality and more detailed the level becomes.

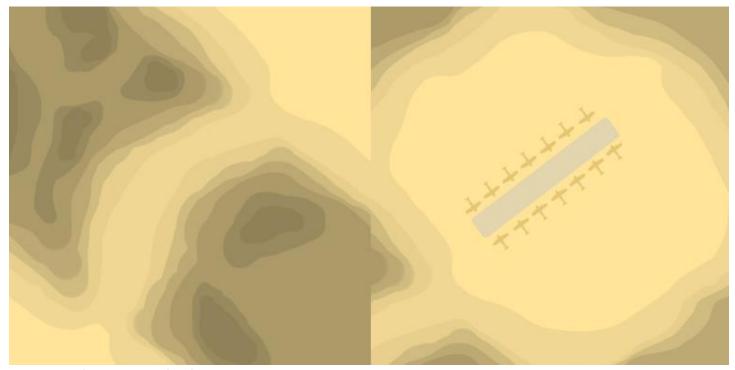


Figure 7 & 8 (valley and airfield)

I always start with a high up top-down map just to get a rough idea of the scale of the map. Getting a large overview of everything helps me to know what areas I need to focus on. The player's mission is to clear the mountain pass so that the rest of their team can get through on vehicles. Doing an A large scale overview top-down map allows me to think through the logic of the mission.

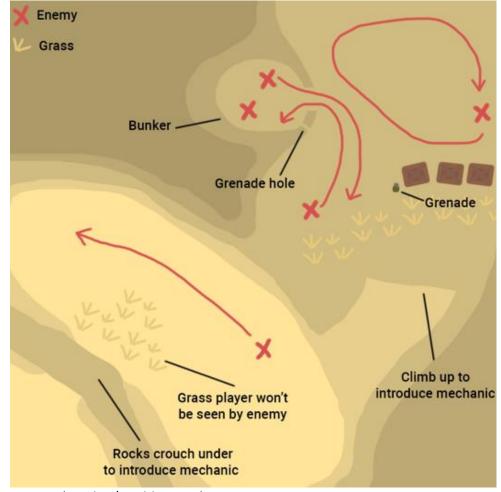


Figure 9 (Combat/stealth area 1)

Above is the top-down map design for the first combat and stealth area of the game. The player starts in the bottom left and is introduced to the Crouch mechanic whilst crouching they enter grass, and they can see a guard walking past them and not seeing them this should introduce them to the concept of being able to hide in grass. They'll then be introduced to climbing. And given a grenade at this point it is up to the player how they handle the enemies they can stealth past them or engage with them in combat. I'm already seeing some improvements I could make to this map for example in engine I could add a further climbing section where the player could avoid all combat.

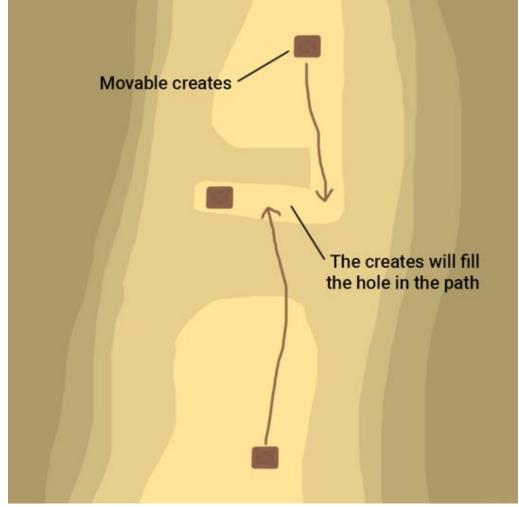


Figure 10 (Puzzel area 1)

This will be the first puzzle in the level. It will involve moving the crates to fill up a hole in the road so that the vehicles will be able to get through later. The overall idea of this area is to introduce the player to the movable boxes so that it can be used later on in a in another puzzle. Ideally, I would like to introduce the player to the movable boxes by having an enemy move one of the boxes. By doing this the player will be able to see the boxes can be moved around. but I do not have the time or the resources to animate a scene like that so I will explain it to the playtesters before they get to this section of the level.

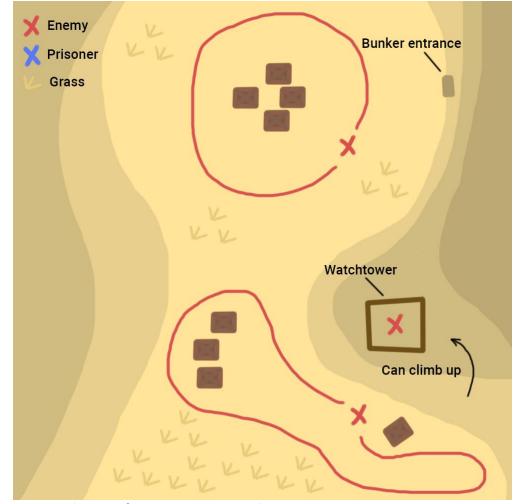


Figure 11 (Combat/stealth area 2 outside)

This is the 2nd combat and stealth area of the level. This area is only the outside and the second half is inside the bunker. The standout element of this area is a watchtower. The player can either stealth their way through this section or eliminate the enemies. On top of this it is completely up to the player whether they go into the bunker or not they can continue to the next section which would be a puzzle to complete the level or investigate inside the bunker. Giving agency to the player and allowing the player to decide is an intentional decision as I'm trying to achieve the arcane style of level design.

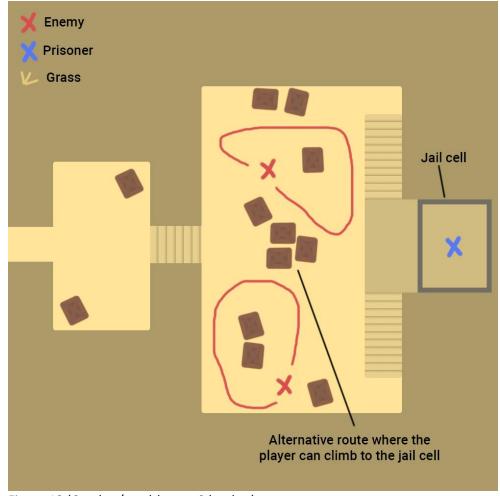


Figure 12 (Combat/stealth area 2 bunker)

This is the underground bunker where the prisoner is being kept that you're tasked with rescuing. Ideally, I would like to make this a little bit more complex as this is a real good opportunity to show off some Arkane design philosophy. But this is just the base design. When I get to making this in my white box, I can add some more complexity. Additionally, I would like to start with something basic before the play test and then get feedback. With this area I have given the player three ways of getting to the jail cell. they could kill the enemy sneak past them or climb their way up. I will develop these ideas further when in the white box stage.

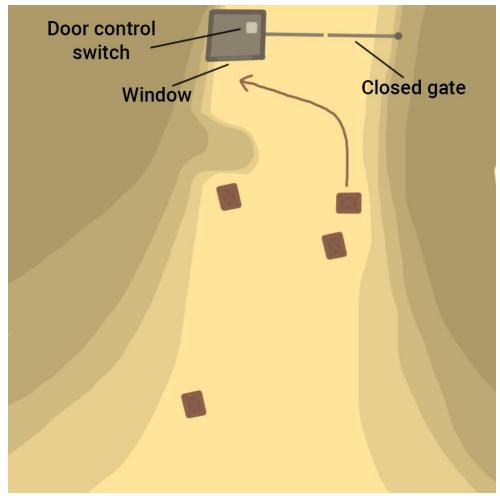


Figure 13 (Puzzle area 2)

This is the 2nd and final puzzle of the level. This will require the player to flip a switch that will open the doors to allow the vehicles to get through fulfilling their mission to clear the path. This puzzle will reuse the box pushing mechanic combine it with the climbing mechanic. This is my final top down. Some of these are very simple and some are quite complex things will only get more complicated when I'm in engine so the more planning I can do at this stage the better.

Blockout/White box



Figure 14, 15 & 16 (white box measurements)

Before I start any white boxing I made sure there was some basic metrics laid out first so there would be continuity throughout the level. This is less important in a smaller scale project like this but if this was a full AAA game and this wasn't done problems would definitely come up later on down the line.



Figure 17 & 18 (white box off combat/stealth 1 v1)

The first area I white boxed was the initial combat and stealth area. Just playing through this section the level does not feel like an Arkane style level yet. I will not come back to this until after the play test but I could potentially add some alternate routes of how to get through the location perhaps an area on the side where you could climb up and avoid the conflict this would add an additional option for the player.



Figure 19 (white box off puzzle 1 V1)

This is my white box of the first puzzle the player must solve. due to time constraints this was unwillingly rushed together. I initially had more advanced ideas but due to how much time I have until the play test I need to go with the simplest option. This is the first time the player will be introduced to the pushable box. Using a boolean tool I have indented paths onto the floor this was initially done to help the player know that the box can move along these but eventually became a tour for designing the puzzle itself.



Figure 20 & 21 (white box of puzzle 1 experiment)

When designing puzzle one I had the idea of using a lift that the player could use to move the push able object onto a different level. From the technical side this grew too complicated to complete within the timeframe.

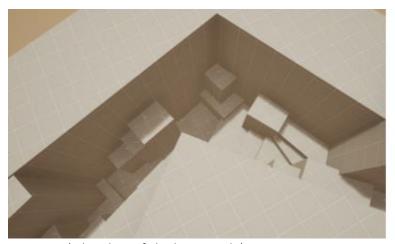


Figure 22 (white box of climbing puzzle)

I added a climbing puzzle section between the box puzzle and the next combat zone. This does go against what I planned on the flow chart but I'm curious to see what the feedback will be after the play test. This will serve as a bit of an experiment.



Figure 23 & 24 (white box of combat/stealth 2 v1)

This is the 2nd combat zone. I stuck to my top-down map accurately except I did go off a little bit in a different direction with the tower. Instead of making a watchtower a maid a raised section of the map where a guard would be on post.



Figure 25 (white box off bunker V1)

This is an image of the white box of the bunker. I made a drastic change at this stage in the project. The original plan according to the flow chart would be to have this area as an optional extra where you could rescue an ally from prison. But I was quickly realizing this was the most interesting element of the map so I should focus on this as the main mission instead of an optional extra. Therefore, I scrapped the puzzle that was set to come after this and made this the end of the level.



Figure 26 & 27 (white box inside bunker v1)

This is the white box of inside the bunker I only put two enemies in here because the player will have to kill the enemies outside as well. To rescue your ally who is the blue character you need to move box this is the end of the level. This is a bit unintuitive even before the play test I can see that but the purpose of this was to get a basic barebones of the level done so that I could improve going forward. After the playtest I will be able continue to develop all these elements of the levels armed with invaluable feedback.

Playtesting

Playtesting is an invaluable part of level design and game development as a whole. As you are designing levels you can test stuff yourself but there will always be problems that you will not be able to see. Getting other people fresh opinions on the project is the best way of improving the quality of your work.



Figure 28 & 29 (Playtest picture 1 & Questionnare)

Therefore, I organised a playtest of my level. I managed to get about 10 people to sit down and play the level. I then had them fill out a feedback questionnaire. The questionnaire was a great way of getting quantitative data Alongside this I went round the room and asked them questions about how they we're finding the experience this was a source of qualitative data. Quantitative data is stuff like percentages and numbers where's quality data is more how people feel about things getting feedback through both these data types is a good idea when going about a play test.



Figure 30 (Playtest picture 2)

Feedback

Below is a list of the questions and interesting answers.

Q1 Was there anything you really enjoyed about the level?

- 1. I enjoyed being able to be stealthy and going loud
- 2. You could beat the level without any shooting
- 3. I also enjoy the part where you have to climb high up in the level and destroy an enemy otherwise he snipes you when you access the lower part

Q2 Was there anything you did not enjoy about the level?

- 1. The pushing the boxes were really slow
- 2. The ending didn't feel like the end cos it was presented more as a secret area than the ending of the level
- 3. Not enough interesting enemy encounters, not very challenging
- 4. Knowing where to find the first gun was somewhat confusing. however they did stand out once I knew what to look for.
- 5. Little to no hints in some cases for directions (More visual indicators needed)

Q3 What are some improvements you would recommend for the map?

- 1. Have more routes then 1
- 2. Maybe another type of puzzle?
- 3. Maybe increase difficultly of enemies e.g. add more
- 4. speed up box pushing
- 5. merge the parkour and combat sections together (Add more verticality)
- 6. Lots of "wall climbs" at the start of the level of the game that interrupt the flow of the level. Maybe change them into optional slopes, keep the level flowing?
- 7. I think it could be made more obvious that you can push crates, ie with a simple puzzle before the actual first puzzle we're given, in which a crate is just barely out of the way of being usable to get onto something.
- 8. more ammo around the level, also different type of cover that don't feel like they are purposely cover, like trees or vehicles (Making the level feel more alive and natural)
- 9. Add more enemies and make it bigger

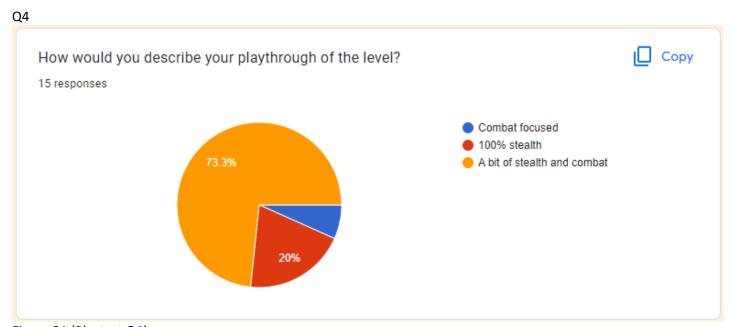


Figure 31 (Playtest Q4)

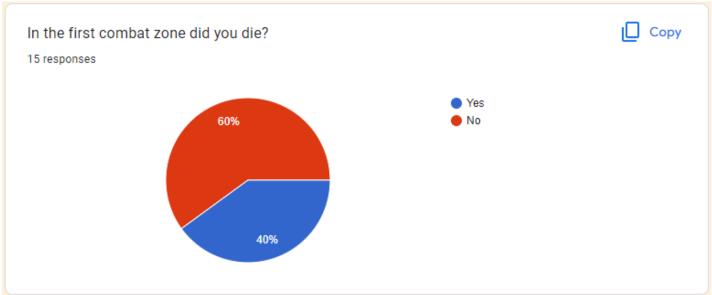


Figure 32 (Playtest Q5)

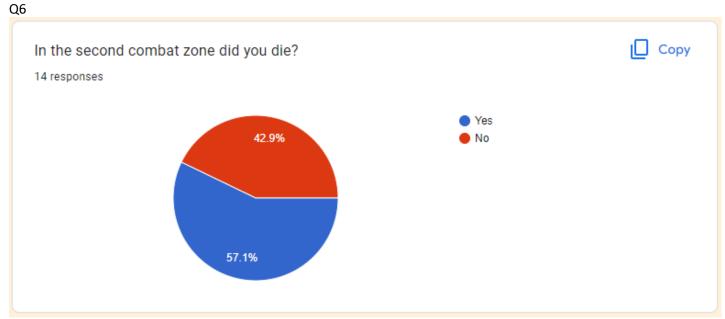


Figure 33 (Playtest Q6)

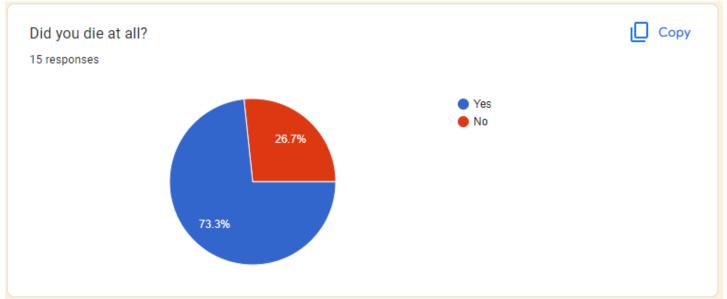
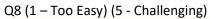


Figure 34 (Playtest Q7)



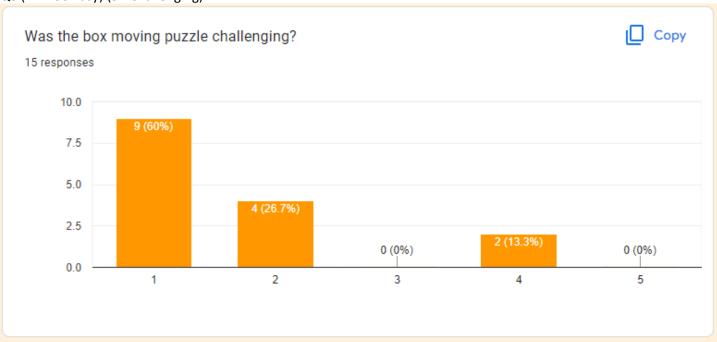


Figure 35 (Playtest Q8)

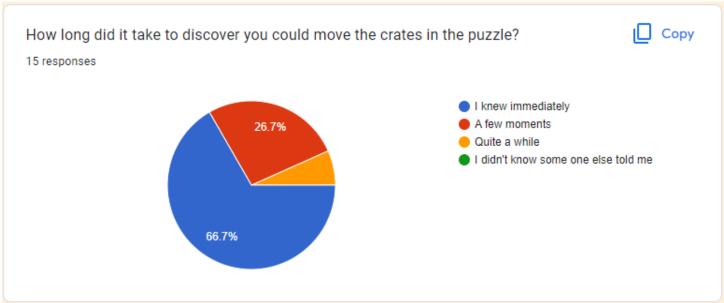
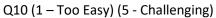


Figure 36 (Playtest Q9)



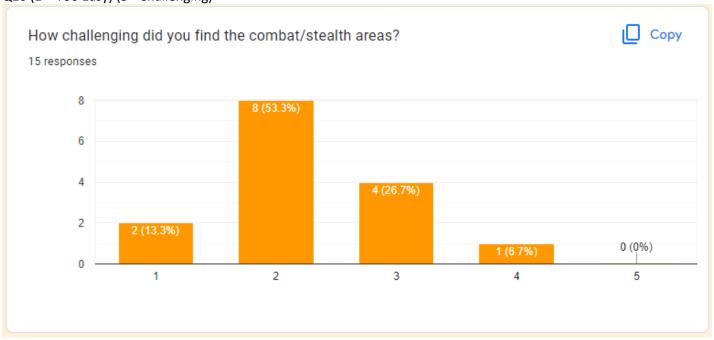


Figure 37 (Playtest Q10)

Q11

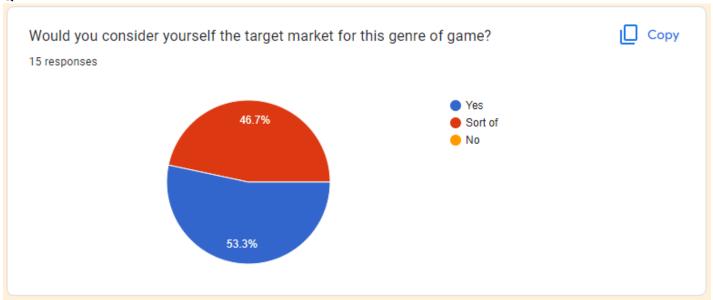


Figure 38 (Playtest Q11)

Q12

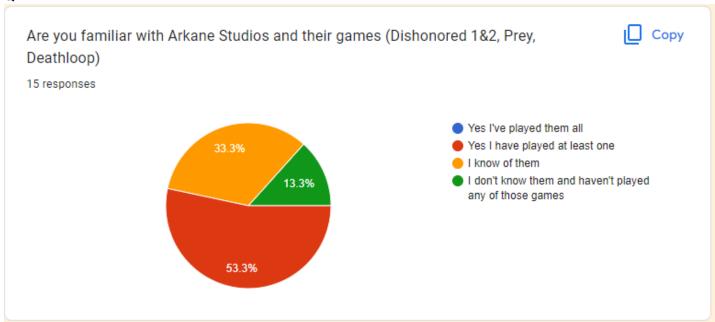


Figure 39 (Playtest Q12)

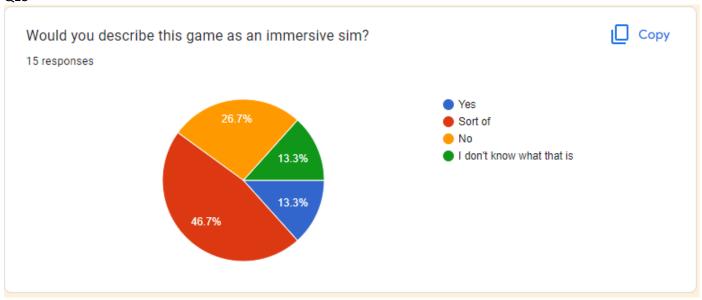


Figure 40 (Playtest Q13)

Q14 Is there anything you think the level was missing?

- 1. Optional routes
- 2. A clear ending
- 3. I think a proper end, got to the blue guy and was able to just walk around doing nothing.

Q15 Is there any final feedback that you would like to give?

- 1. The level felt a bit short
- 2. I would say less of an immersive sim as the current state of the development of the level was in didn't provide much context to lean towards an 'immersive sim'.

Short Analysis

Main points that repeatedly come up in the questionnaire, the sub bullet points are potential solutions:

- The box moving puzzle was too simplistic (Q8) and people struggled to know that they could push the boxes
 - Redesign the puzzle to be more challenging and add a simpler box puzzle to introduce the pushing mechanic before this puzzle.
 - With more combat areas there should be more puzzles to break up gameplay and help with pacing
- Ending not clear to the players (Q14-A2&3)
 - Design ending to be more of a conclusion to the level. Change from rescue mission to assassination mission where you must steal top secret documents, the player must steal them but can choose whether to kill the target or not.
 - Design final section, head honchos' office with documents that player must steal. But the player must get past big bad guy.
- Combat areas are too easy (Q10) there are not enough optional routes for the player (Q14A1) only 13% would describe the level as an immersive sim (Q13).
 - Make the combat areas bigger (more challenging) and create more diverse routes for the players.
 - o "Merge the parkour and combat sections together" (Q3-A5) Add verticality

- Box moves to slowly
 - Speed up box moving and reduce the size of the puzzle areas.

Iteration



Figure 41 (New added puzzle)

This is a simple block pushing puzzle did I inserted at the very beginning of the level. This puzzle only requires the player to push the box not climb on top of it. My hope is this we'll introduce the basic block moving mechanic to the player so that in the second puzzle the player does not have to learn too many mechanics at once.

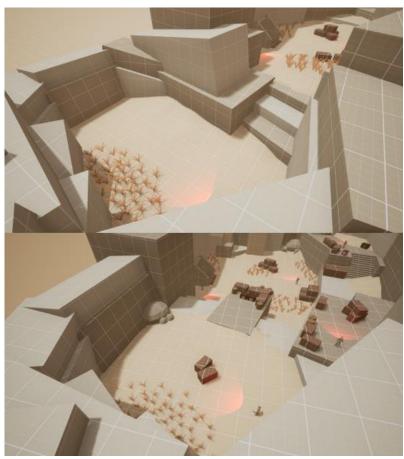


Figure 42 & 43 (C/S 1 & C/S 1 redon 1)

I significantly redesigned the 1st combat and stealth area. In this first section where the comes out from the tunnel I elevated the ground so the player would get a clear view on the area ahead. I additionally added two optional routes for the player to take. With the added verticality the player should get a better idea of where each route will take them.



Figure 44 & 45 (C/S 1 & C/S 1 redon 2)

I added verticality and redesigned the exit so it would be more visible to the player at the beginning of the level.



Figure 46 & 47 (Puzzle 1 & Puzzle 1 redon)

I redesigned the initial box moving puzzle. The first section of the area introduces to the player that they can climb up the box. The next section of the puzzle requires the player to push the box through a maze. I additionally designed an area the player can climb up to give them an overview of the maze.

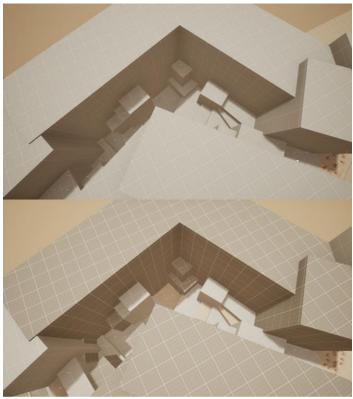


Figure 48 & 49 (Climbing Puzzle & Climbing Puzzle redon)

For the climbing puzzle I didn't change any of the geometry but changed the materials. This is because a player said they got disoriented in this section.



Figure 50 & 51 (C/S 1 & C/S redon 1)

I redesigned the 2nd combat and stealth section of the level. I added further verticality and more enemies to increase the challenge. Additionally, I added some areas of the level that could be accessed through climbing and jumping. Combining this with combat will add variety to the gameplay.



Figure 52 & 53 (C/S 2 & C/S redon 2)

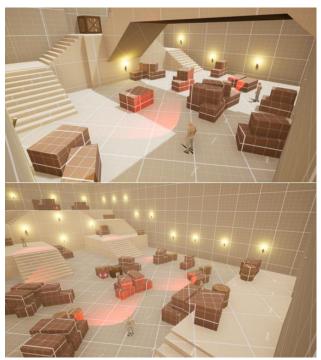


Figure 54 & 55 (Underground section & Underground section 2 redon 1)

I significantly increased the size of the underground section. I increased the number of enemies in order to increase the challenge. I elevated the initial entrance so the player could get an overview of the enemy guards.



Figure 56 (underground section redon 2)

I added verticality and designed multiple routes for the player to take to get up the stairs. I additionally redesigned the ending initially opting for a rescue mission but changed it to retrieval mission. A notable character named Sleeveless Jack guards secrets documents that you must steal. Having the main mission be stealing the documents allows players to complete the mission in a non-lethal manner. As this subscribes to the arcane style of level design.

Senior Game Designer Feedback

Senior game designer Gabriel Chauri from Auroch Digital was kind enough to give me some one-to-one feedback on my level. The main feedback was:

- The first puzzle the player is given is too slow and is not a good way to begin the level.
 - o Have one of the boxes already in place this will save the player time
 - Start the level with the combat section as it's more exciting



Figure 57

- The first enemy the player encounters is not threatening enough because it is easy for the player to run around them.
 - Move the enemies walking path so that it walks through the tall grass closer to the player

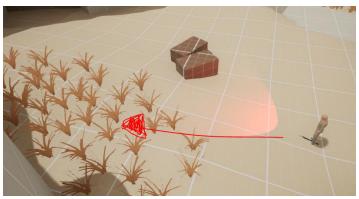


Figure 58

- The enemies are not very human in movement and act more like robots because they can only see in front of them where the light is showing.
 - Add think fog which would explain why the enemies don't have peripheral vision
- He pointed out how the level guided players towards the weapons in the first section and if I wanted to create a level that promoted stealth and combat, I was already leading the players towards combat more than stealth.
 - My response was that without weapons the only way a player could kill an enemy was with a stealth attack from behind which was very buggy and as this was a level design project, I didn't want to allocate too much time to fixing a bug, so this was my design solution.



Figure 59

- The position of the checkpoints was not communicated clearly.
 - A clear visual indicator that can be used throughout the level to say to the player that it is a save point
- He said that the Second puzzle slowed down the levels pacing far too much
 - short and the puzzle



Figure 60

- The jumping section slowed down the game again and created problems from the realism point of view as the player could fall a great distance and not lose any health.
 - o Either shorten the jumping section and get rid of the high jumps or potentially remove it from the level.

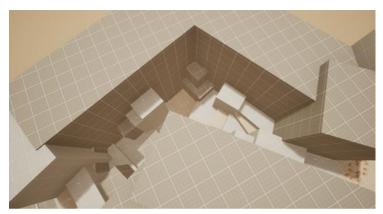


Figure 61

- He pointed out how again The level seems to lean more towards combat than stealth, highlighting the fact that some of the sections were covered in ammo pickups and cover very much designed for combat.
 - Make stealth routes more obvious
 - o Communicate to the player that the pistol is silenced



Figure 62

- The enemy paths are too complicated in the final interior section because it is hard to predict where they're going to go.
 - o Simplify the enemy paths to a maximum of two points to help readability

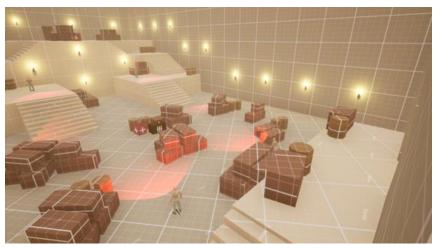


Figure 63

Planned Iteration

My plan going forward will be to iterate based on the feedback from Gabriel. Along with fixing all the smaller issues I laid out above I will also be doing some big changes:

- Swap section 1 and 2 around. This will mean the levels start with a combat and stealth section and then lead into a puzzle.
- Section 1 and 3 will also merge resulting in one simplified puzzle with two stages the jumping section will be completely removed. This will mean this will hopefully mean that the puzzle does not slow down the pacing too much.
- Finally, Section 4 will be significantly changed. The exterior for section 4 will offer multiple entrances into the interior. There will be a combat route, stealth route and a new puzzle route.

This is a Top-down view of the entire level.

- 1. Initial box moving puzzle
- 2. First combat area
- 3. Second box moving puzzle and climbing section
- 4. Final combat area exterior and interior



Figure 64

Second Iteration

Big Changes

This is the second major iteration of this level. I will start with the big changes.

Section 1 and 2 swapping places is the first big change, but I can't just drop the player into the first combat zone without teaching them the basic movement and telling them their mission. I will need to introduce:

- WASD movement
 - o Press 'WASD' to move
 - Hold 'Shift' to sprint
 - You need to retrieve the documents, but Sleeveless Jack is protecting them
- Climbing
 - o Press 'Space' to climb
 - o If you can find Jack, you can find the documents
 - o Nobody needs to die either way your mission is the documents, you have discretion
- Crouching
 - o Press 'Ctrl' to crouch
 - o Crouching in grass will keep you hidden

I designed a small section to introduce these mechanics to the player.

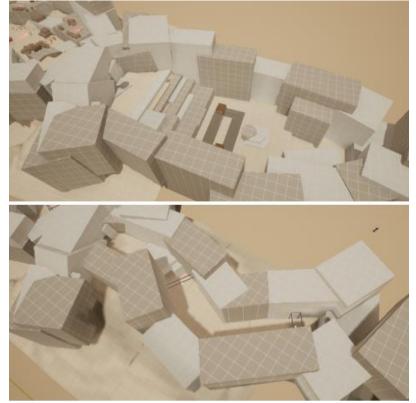


Figure 65

Below is before and after I merged sections 1 and 3 into one simplified puzzle, introducing moving the box and climbing on the box mechanics.



Figure 66

For the third big change section 4 was significantly changed. The exterior for section 4 will offer multiple entrances into the interior. There will be a combat route, stealth route and a new puzzle route.

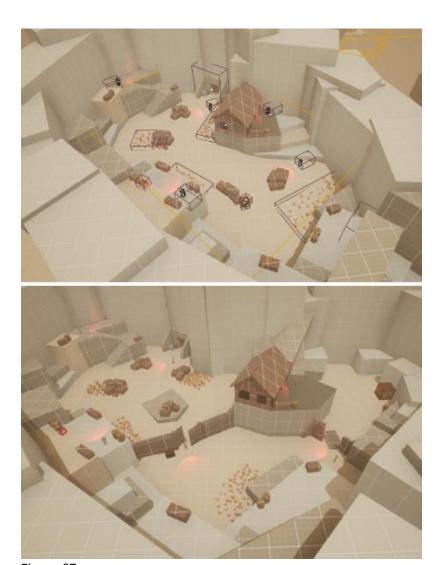


Figure 67

Reposition the house to be into the centre. And added walls this was to help show the player what areas they could confront the enemy and do more of a combat-oriented approach or go around and do a more stealth oriented approach.

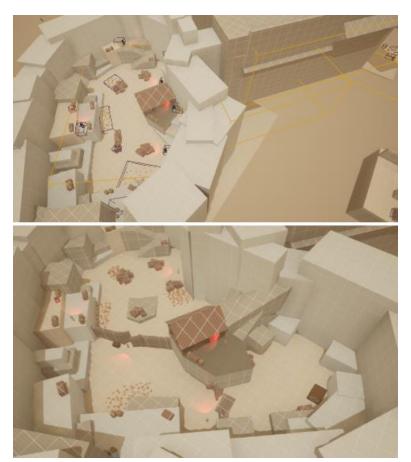


Figure 68

Added a section around the side to give the player more stealth options. they can climb under the big rock and avoid confronting the enemies at the gate. or they could solve a simple box moving and climbing puzzle which would give them access to the house and it allows them to go through the underground tunnel avoiding all combat.

Smaller Changes

Moving the enemies walking path so that it walks through the tall grass closer to the player.



Figure 69

Added blue barrel to visually communicate a checkpoint to the player.



Figure 70

Added a message to tell the player that the pistol is silenced.

Aim at the head, the Pistol is silenced

Figure 71

Simplify the enemy paths to a maximum of two points to help readability



Figure 72

Conclusion

The main goals of this project were to create a level around a design test brief. My own personal goal was to stress test my process particularly in the playtesting areas I wanted to get a basic white box done as quickly as possible so I could play test it. Both these objectives were achieved. You can download and play the level yourself on the edge itch.io page linked below. On the page you will find two versions of the map v0.1 was post the initial playtest and v0.2 is my final version after my feedback from Gabriel (Senior Game Designer).

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